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HD As carbon-tax foes bicker, B.C. pitches to PM

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As a booster for the federal climate-change plan, Premier Horgan wants Ottawa's help

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The Conservative premiers of Ontario and Saskatchewan were fuming at the recent first ministers meeting when Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, working to salvage his pan-Canadian climate action framework, suggested some provinces might have to do more than others to achieve the country's targets to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions.

One of those provinces being called upon to do extra duty is British Columbia, but B.C. Premier John Horgan wasn't complaining. For him, the meeting was an opportunity to press for a favour – cash to help bail out a troubled Crown corporation that is central to B.C's clean energy ambitions.

Mr. Horgan arrived for the Montreal meeting with his own new clean-energy plan tucked under his arm, putting B.C. in the Prime Minister's good books – at least when it comes to climate action. The B.C. Premier used his time at the microphone to argue with carbon tax dissenters that a national standard on carbon pricing isn't a threat to the economy.

“I demonstrated that we have had economic growth despite carbon prices, we have had job creation despite carbon pricing," he said in a year-end interview with The Globe and Mail. For good measure, he reminded the other premiers that his province even managed to squeeze in a new heavy emitter – the $40-billion LNG Canada project – into his plan to meet the province's targets to cut GHGs by the year 2030. “So I don't think we should be frightened of climate action, we should be emboldened by the need to take action."

Was he persuasive among the resistance? Mr. Horgan wouldn't say, but he was hardly flattering about his carbon tax opponents on the national stage. “Saskatchewan seems to believe they are immune to climate change," he said.

Saskatchewan, Ontario and New Brunswick are going to court to challenge the constitutionality of Ottawa's move to implement its climate-change plan by imposing a carbon tax in jurisdictions that don't have their own broad-based emissions strategy. B.C. will be in court in February arguing Canada's side.

Having played his role in backing Mr. Trudeau's climate ambitions, Mr. Horgan then sat down for a one-on-one meeting in Montreal with the Prime Minister to talk about what B.C. needs from the federal government to help tackle climate change.

Specifically, B.C. needs a whack of capital to complete Mr. Horgan's plan – money to help wean the province from its dependence on fossil fuels to an economy that runs on clean electricity.

“We talked about electrification, how we could work with the the federal government on green initiatives like making sure we are building that distribution and transmission infrastructure that we are going to need," Mr. Horgan said.

The Crown corporation at the heart of B.C.'s new climate plan, BC Hydro, is heavily indebted and is already adding a massive new capital project, the Site C hydroelectric dam in the northeast of the province. Mr. Horgan noted that the cash flow isn't great either. BC Hydro has surplus energy – in part from longterm contracts for private power which currently costs more to produce than Hydro can sell it for. That surplus energy problem will be resolved if B.C. turns to electricity to power vehicles, home heating, and industry, but that can happen only if BC Hydro upgrades its ability to distribute more power.

Last week, British Columbians learned that the provinciallyowned auto insurer will be raising premiums. And in January, they'll find out how much their electricity rates will rise. For Mr. Horgan, elected on a promise to make life more affordable, dumping the cost of his electrification program onto the Crownowned BC Hydro isn't a good political solution. A federal commitment to B.C's new green economy is, plainly, a critical part of the plan.

B.C.'s success or failure in meeting its targets won't make much of dent in combating global climate change.

Greg D'Avignon, head of the Business Council of B.C., noted in an interview that the province's carbon emissions are just a speck, in international terms: “If all of us in British Columbia walked out the door and locked it behind us, that would solve China's GHG problem for two days."

But Canada needs to succeed, and to do that, it does need British Columbia's help. That's why Mr. Horgan seems so confident he can bank on Ottawa to help bail out the financially-troubled BC Hydro.

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